Creaking, Growling: feminine noisiness and vocal fry in the music of Joan La Barbara and Runhild Gammelsæter

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In recent years, much media attention has been paid to the phenomenon of vocal fry– a creaking, growling affectation that occurs when the voice is in its lowest register. Vocal fry has been understood as a specifically feminine affliction. This "irritating" mannerism is characterised as infecting the speech patterns of young Anglophone women. Yet vocal fry is neither new nor gender specific. Indeed, it has long been used in music as a means of aiding expressivity and generating unusual vocal sonorities. In this article, I interrogate the phenomenon of vocal fry and its use as a musical resource. It is important to note that there are various definitions of vocal fry: it can pertain to a particular vocal register, effect or both; how it is defined colloquially (i.e. with reference to its perceptual qualities) differs from how it is defined in linguistics and phonetics (i.e. as a physiological and acoustic phenomenon). I primarily refer to the former definition, that is, vocal fry as it pertains to a set of perceptual characteristics. I argue that vocal fry, as it has been characterised in recent accounts by feminist and media commentators, connects to a historical lineage of "feminised" noise. In Eurocentric cultures, feminine vocal qualities and speech have long been admonished as "noisy" – that is, unwanted, irritating, meaningless and damaging. I then turn to vocal fry's use in music. I begin with its utilisation as an extended vocal technique in experimental and contemporary music, as is the case in the vocal work of singer and composer Joan La Barbara. Yet vocal fry has also been used outside of this musical sphere: many of the generic vocal styles of metal, for example, derive from vocal fry. I consider the solo work of vocalist Runhild Gammelsæter, which connects the sound-worlds of metal and experimental music. I suggest that La Barbara and Gammelsæter can be heard to take the sonorous qualities associated with vocal fry to an extreme: La Barbara extends the creak, whilst Gammelsæter extends the growl.

Vocal fry and feminine noise

In July 2015, Naomi Wolf, writing in The Guardian, called for young women to 'give up the vocal fry' and reclaim their 'strong female voice'.[1] Vocal fry is a common feature of what Wolf identifies as contemporary young women's 'destructive vocal patterns'. Typically appearing at the end of words and the beginning and end of sentences, vocal fry is largely associated with female voices prominent in contemporary American popular culture: Kim Kardashian, Katy Perry and Zooey Deschanel are cited as exemplary users of this speech mannerism. Wolf claims that vocal fry, as well as sentence run-ons, breathiness and 'uptalk' undermines women's authority: it is associated with hesitancy and a lack of confidence. In addition, those in positions of power tend to find these vocal traits a source of irritation: 'many devoted professors, employers who wish to move young women up the ranks and business owners who just want to evaluate personnel on their merits flinch over the speech patterns of today's young women.'[2] Consequently, Wolf characterises vocal fry as a problem that needs overcoming. She argues that young women need to stop disowning their power and need to learn to speak in a manner that enables their voices to be taken seriously.

Wolf's article is one of a number of recent pieces that criticise women – specifically young American women – for their use of vocal fry. On a 'Lexicon Valley' podcast for Slate, journalist, commentator and NPR presenter Bob Garfield described 'creaky voice' – 'the new voice of the young, urban, upwardly mobile woman' as 'repulsive', 'vulgar' and a 'mindless affectation'.[3] In an interview for NPR, actor Lake Bell states that she is 'personally ruptured and unsettled' by the unsavoury 'pandemic' of vocal fry and uptalk.[4] The actor and presenter Faith Salie on CBS' 'Sunday News' says that she is 'dismayed' by the 'annoying' phenomenon, claiming that it makes users sound 'underwhelmed' and 'disengaged': 'it's annoying to listen to a young woman who sounds world weary. And exactly like her fourteen beeeest freeeeinds'.[5] In The Huffington Post, presentation coach Michelle Hakala-Wolf warns that vocal fry 'can be difficult to listen to and damaging to your vocal chords'. It can 'make you sound young and inexperienced

even if you are the expert in your field'.[6] Indeed, a study by Anderson et al. that gained much media coverage suggests that young American women who spoke in the vocal fry range are less likely to be hired by employers as they are perceived as less educated, competent, trustworthy or attractive. The study concludes that young American women should avoid using vocal fry speech in order to maximise their job market opportunities.[7]

A number of scholars and media commentators have responded to these admonishments of vocal fry and its users, pointing out that these accounts are demeaning, inaccurate and fundamentally lacking in evidence. In an open letter to Naomi Wolf, feminist linguist Deborah Cameron asserts that 'what is really destructive and undermining to women is the constant criticism to which their speech is subjected.' For Cameron, the problem is not with how young women speak but is in the ear of the beholder: 'Teaching young women to accommodate to the linguistic preferences, A.K.A. prejudices, of the men who run law firms and engineering companies is doing the patriarchy's work for it. It's accepting that there's a problem with women's speech, rather than a problem with sexist attitudes to women's speech.'[8]

Cameron also notes that though it is often characterised as such, in practice, vocal fry is not a gender specific phenomenon. For instance, fry is understood to be a component of the speech of upper-class Englishmen, insofar as speakers of Received Pronunciation often use 'creaky voice'.[9] Likewise, contra characterisations of vocal fry as an exclusively female phenomenon, the linguist Mark Liberman has produced a waveform analysis of the voice of Bruce Willis, showing the prevalence of 'creak' and 'fry' in his speaking voice. He also notes the lack of non-anecdotal evidence to support the claim that young women use vocal fry more than others – be they older women, men or women in earlier decades. It might be, then, that the perception of vocal fry as significantly more prevalent amongst young women is due to 'stereotype formation and confirmation bias'.[10] Indeed, Anderson et al.'s aforementioned study, which examines perceptions of vocal fry in the workplace, found that both male and female voices featuring vocal fry were perceived negatively by comparison to voices without fry; however, female voices featuring vocal fry were perceived more negatively by comparison to male voices

featuring vocal fry. In other words, the study suggests that although both men and women use vocal fry, the latter are judged more harshly for it.

Although vocal fry is not gender specific, some have postulated that women are its pioneers and the affectation is the latest marker of feminine vocal innovation. Gabriel Arana, for example, considers 'creaky voice' to be yet another example of the linguistic ingenuity of young women. Arana argues that for linguists, "NORMs" – 'non- mobile, older, rural males typically exemplify where language has been, whilst young urban women point to where language is going'.[11] Arana's account exemplifies the depiction of vocal fry as a recent phenomenon. Yet though it may have become more prevalent in contemporary speech, it is not a new mannerism. As Mike Vuolo asserts, vocal fry is prone to the "recency illusion" – the crackling and creaking vocal delivery of Mae West's notorious quip 'why don't you come up sometime and see me?' in She Done Him Wrong (1933) demonstrates that the phenomenon by no means originates with the idols of 21st century pop culture.[12]

Vocal fry can be understood of as part of historical lineage of feminine or "feminised" noises. Though neither new nor gender specific, it is the latest of a variety of vocal sounds, styles and practices to be deemed both feminine and "noisy". In Eurocentric cultures, this association has a long history. As Anne Carson notes, 'putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is the ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death.'[13] The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for example, considered women's high-pitched voice to be evidence of her evil disposition, insofar as noble creatures have large and deep voices.[14] The negative connotations of feminine, high- pitched voices continue into modernity, though this is not to suggest that sonic stereotypes of feminine voices are ahistorical or static. In her discourse analysis of accounts of gender inequality in British radio broadcasting, for instance, Rosalind Gill exemplifies how women's voices have been dismissed as 'unsuitable' for radio: they are deemed 'too shrill', 'too high' and 'grating'. Broadcasters have justified the marginalisation of women's voices on the grounds that they risk irritating radio listeners

in that they depart from the 'norm' of the low, male voice. [15]

In addition to cultural admonishments of feminine vocal qualities, the content and quantity of feminine speech and conversation has also been dismissed as unwelcome, meaningless and unimportant. Indeed, Carson asserts that historically, high vocal pitch has been coupled with talkativeness 'to characterize a person who is deviant from or deficient in the masculine ideal of self-control.'[16] Gossip, for instance, is typically construed as a feminine tendency and devalued as an illegitimate, informal and 'improper' mode of communication. [17] It is considered a marker of a lack of self-control and restraint; as Giselle Bastin argues, those who partake in gossip are often characterised as women with 'loose lips'.[18]

Vocal fry is "noisy" in (at least) two senses. As with patriarchal characterisations of gossip and high-pitched voices, it is noisy in the sense that it is dismissed as unwanted and undesirable; vocal fry is something to be abated, minimised and overcome. It is also noisy in a materialist sense, in that it involves the material medium – that is, the body, vocal folds – infecting and interfering with the 'signal' of the speaking voice. Vocal fry, then, acts as a reminder of the material dimension of communication; and a reminder of a long history of feminine noises that are heard as unwanted, trivial and unattractive.

Creak: Joan La Barbara

Though rarely referred to as such in recent media accounts, vocal fry has been intentionally employed as a musical technique by singers of all genders working in various musical contexts. In contemporary and experimental vocal music, for instance, the fry register and affectation have been a source of invention: it has been used as a means of generating alternative forms of vocal expression. Writing on the twenty-first century voice, Michael Edgerton characterises vocal fry as 'an overused, stereotypical sound in much composed music of the extended technique variety'. He goes on to state that in the context of contemporary music, 'vocal fry is useful as a vehicle or doorway to finding more interesting asymmetries'.[19] As this suggests (and Edgerton's

dismissiveness notwithstanding),vocal fry is treated in these musical contexts as an extended technique that can help to generate new and unusual sonorities. Such is the case in the work of experimental composer, performer and sound artist Joan La Barbara, who extends and expands the "creak" that characterises vocal fry.

La Barbara's work interrogates the capacities of the human voice as a multi-faceted instrument: she aims to expand the sonic and timbral boundaries of the singing voice by incorporating unconventional vocal techniques. In her afterword to Attali's Noise, Susan McClary alludes to the notion of feminised noise when she describes Joan La Barbara's practice as 'celebrating' her status as an 'outsider' to the masculinist space of Western art music. Rather than submitting her voice to 'institutionalized definitions of permissible order', La Barbara works with 'what counts in many official circles as noise'.[20] From this perspective, vocal fry is part of La Barbara's noise-oriented and, in McClary's eyes, feminist musical language. This noisy vocabulary draws the boundaries that have been demarcated by normative art music cultures. Her work foregrounds and extends the corporeal, a-signifying vocal sounds that are ordinarily suppressed and minimised in conventional (i.e. classical and operatic) singing practice: there are squeaks, gargles, pops and creaks. Yet La Barbara's voice does not simply emulate an imagined pre-linguistic vocal state. Indeed, her unorthodox musical vocabulary was inspired by the explorative approaches being taken by jazz and experimental instrumentalists in 1960s New York, as she describes: 'I heard instrumentalists experimenting, really beginning to expand and thinking about the sound of their instruments, but I didn't hear vocalists doing the same thing...there was [pioneering experimental vocalist] Cathy Berberian's vocal work with Luciano Berio, but her extensions were mostly basic human sounds – some gasping, coughing or laughing. I wanted to move beyond that, to do what I heard those experimental instrumentalists doing.'[21]

La Barbara's 'Cathing' (1977) – a quasi-homage and creative response to an interview with Cathy Berberian – uses the creak of vocal fry as a rhythmic motif. The piece is essentially a "duet" between Berberian and La Barbara. It begins with a recorded interview with Berberian from the 1970s in which she labels extended vocal practitioners

‘freaks’ (Berberian is careful to distance herself from this label: she states that she can also sing ‘in the true sense of the word’) and claims that only a ‘foolish’ composer would write for a singer who specialises in extended vocal techniques. La Barbara responds to this interview segment with a tapestry of sounds, consisting of treated fragments from the Berberian interview and La Barbara’s vocalisations. She wraps Berberian’s voice in a web of drones, chirrups, descending glissandi and tutting sounds. A low, creaking gesture of accelerating and decelerating glottal clicks reappears every few seconds, contrasting sharply with La Barbara’s high- pitched chirps and standing out against the slow-moving drone notes. As ‘Cathing’ moves towards its conclusion the creaking fry gesture becomes more strangled; it becomes less rattling and more constricted. The eight- minute piece abruptly closes with Berberian stating that ‘the freak element is all.’

La Barbara uses a similar creaking vocalisation in her soundance ‘Q-/Uatre petites bêtes’ (1979) first performed at Baack’scher Kunstraum gallery in Cologne, Germany and commissioned by the gallerist Annette Baack. Composed for a quadraphonic sound installation and inspired by the spatialization of Marcel Duchamp’s Rendez-vous du Dimanche 6 Février 1916 (1916), the piece is much sparser than ‘Cathing’. It contains four distinct characters – “little beasts” – each of which has a distinctive sonic language. According to La Barbara, the piece enacts their meeting in an imaginary clearing. The first vocal line established is a shrill ululation; and the second by a croaking, gravelly fry vocalisation, which is sounded on both the inhale and exhale (La Barbara appears to be circular breathing). This is followed by another fry vocalisation – one that is more akin to the glottal creaking gesture of ‘Cathing’. The final voice to enter is a quiet, high-pitched screeching vocalisation. Throughout the piece, each voice remains distinct. However, once all four voices are established, they begin to interact with and overlap one another, creating a wall of sound.

Growl: Runhild Gammelsæter

Vocal fry has also been readily utilised in popular music: its history is full of noisy feminine voices that creak, crackle and growl. The fry register has been used to assist singers in reaching high and low pitches, as well as featuring as a stylistic element that

adds colour and intensity to particular notes. Indeed, Britney Spears's use of vocal fry in the opening line of 'Baby One More Time' is frequently cited as an example of and a source of inspiration for the noisiness of contemporary women's speech patterns.[22] Yet there are many other examples that pre-date Spear's notorious deployment of the fry affectation: from jazz singers such as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (see, for example, Holiday's recording of 'Strange Fruit' (1956) or Simone's 'I put a Spell on You'(1965)) to the unusual vocal opening of 'Waterfalls' by the R&B group TLC (1994). On the disco track 'Love to Love you Baby' (1975), Donna Summer's semi- whispered vocals dip into and soar out of the fry range. Summer's low, creaking voice, along with the moans, sighs and outbursts of laughter that undercut the song's refrain, contribute to the track's auditory emulations of feminine sexual pleasure. Indeed, vocal fry is frequently used in pop to create an affectation of intimacy and tenderness; as is the case in Nelly Furtado's 'I'm like a bird' (2000) and Mariah Carey's 'We belong together' (2005).

In certain popular music genres, vocal fry is treated less as an embellishment (as is typically the case in pop) and is approached as an extended technique in a manner more akin to contemporary and experimental music. In metal music genres, sonic quality and force of the voice are typically considered to be more important than the clear communication of lyrical content; and many of the singing techniques used derive from vocal fry.[23] "Fry screaming", for example, involves screaming from the voice's fry register and sustaining the sound using the diaphragm; whilst croaked vocals and guttural growls (sometimes jokingly referred to as 'cookie monster singing') are common features of the vocal deliveries of certain metal subgenres, including death metal and grindcore.

The Norwegian metal vocalist Runhild Gammelsæter makes apparent the connections between the vocal practices of metal and experimental music: her solo work conjoins these two musical worlds. Gammelsæter is known for her bestial low-pitched growl. She was the vocalist of the American doom band Thorr's Hammer, which she joined aged seventeen whilst on a student exchange programme from Norway. Thorr's Hammer were short-lived but productive: they existed for six weeks, played two concerts and released one EP, Dommedagsnatt (1996).[24] She was also the vocalist for the ambient doom band

Khlyst; and provided vocals for Sunn O)))'s White1 (2003).

In 2008, Gammelsæter released her solo album Amplicon: a mutative collage of voices. The album's eleven tracks are based around stages of the life cycle of the universe, which includes but is not restricted to the evolution and extinction of human life. As the album notes explain, amplicon are 'pieces of DNA formed as the production of natural or artificial amplification events'. The title alludes to the fragmented source material from which the album is constructed: 'pieces of sound, words, phrases recorded and amplified.'[25] Amplicon contains multiple vocal timbres and styles: in addition to Gammelsæter's signature low growl, it features melancholic singing, ritualistic chanting and recitations, spoken word, and whispered voices. According to Gammelsæter, the album largely consists of sounds originating from the voice: many of which have been modified and treated so that their origin is unidentifiable. She also recorded her voice through her body: 'a big part of the concept was to use my voice and my whole body...I recorded the sound of my voice through my neck using a digital stethoscope while singing'. The album features other corporeal sounds, such as the sound of Gammelsæter's breathing recorded from the lungs; and the sound of her heartbeat, recorded using a digital stethoscope.

Whilst Amplicon maintains some of the aesthetics and vocal timbres of metal, its fragmented form means that is more unconventional and unpredictable in terms of structure. The multiple vocal lines encounter and interrupt one another; parts begin and end unexpectedly; layers of vocalisations serve to disconcert. 'Love' is one of the most unpredictable tracks on the album in terms of style and structure. It begins with a heartbeat sound, which appears throughout the album. The heartbeat sound is gradually accompanied by slowly ascending long notes and a mid-range fry growl. Gammelsæter's delivery suggests that she is reciting something but her growl renders her words incomprehensible. For the first minute and a half of the track, the layers of voices remain confused and out of focus, creating a disorienting effect. A short fragment of Gammelsæter singing in a singer- songwriter style suddenly rises above the muddied and muddled ambience. Its clarity and style creates a strange juxtaposition between overtly feminine poppiness and Gammelsæter's bestial growl. Following this short interjection

Gammelsæter's voices become incoherent and muddied, only to be interrupted once again by another singer-songwriter style fragment. Toward the end of the track, Gammelsæter's growl appears high in the mix, jumping out at the listener from the muffled voice that precedes it. Her growl and the heartbeat pulse bring the track to its close.

A similar juxtaposition between singing and growling – between the "feminine" and the "bestial" – is created on the album's opening track: 'Collapse/Lifting the Veil'. The track largely consists of a fragmented, call-and- response duet between Gammelsæter's low growling vocalisation and her clear, melodic singing voice. On this track, however, the lyrical content of Gammelsæter's growl is mostly discernable. The track's vocals begin with Gammelsæter growling 'when the sun turns black', to which Gammelsæter's gentler singing voice responds 'when the sun turns black, when the stars fall down...' For the most part, these two vocalisations are treated as separate and distinct layers, in a manner akin to Joan La Barbara's 'Q-/-Uatre petites bêtes'. At the end of the track, however, these two voices – the "bestial" and the "feminine", growling and singing – are brought together, as Gammelsæter audibly moves between them. The tracks concluding lyric 'she was slain', is repeated three times: the first is growled, the third is sung. On the second, Gammelsæter passes between these vocalisations: her voice rapidly becomes less distorted as she moves out of the fry register. With this, noisy, "bestial" growling and "feminine" melodic singing are revealed to be two expressions of the one voice.

Conclusion: from irritating affectation to extended technique

Vocal fry is a feminist issue. So claims the heading of Cally Foster's letter to The Guardian. Yet where Foster goes on to chastise women who adopt this 'laughable speech impediment', I consider a more effective feminist approach to question and challenge these denouncements of women's voices.[26] Indeed, vocal fry's use in music helps to counter popular media narratives that characterise it as a recent and derivative affectation, while also opening up alternative ways to talk about it. In music, vocal fry has been

utilised as an explorative technique, generating unconventional sonorities and timbres. In the work of Joan La Barbara and Runhild Gammelsæter two of the primary sonic attributes associated with vocal fry – the creak and the growl – are extended and foregrounded. Both artists emphasise the material noisiness of vocal fry: they bring the body – the means and the medium of the voice – to the fore, making audible the ways in which it both generates and interferes with vocal sound. Both artists can also be interpreted as alluding to notions of feminine noisiness. For La Barbara, this comes about through utilising a noisy musical vocabulary consisting of sounds typically minimised in the masculinist lineage of Western art music. Gammelsæter, meanwhile, can be heard to create connections between the growling and singing voice, alluding to a suppressed and minimised noisiness that underlies feminine vocalities. Thus though their work differs in style, La Barbara and Gammelsæter can be connected to one another through their employment of the affectation as an extended technique: they both foreground vocal fry's creative potential.

Joan La Barbara 'Cathing' is in *Tapesongs* (Chiaroscuro Records, 1977) and'Q-/-Uatre Petites Betes', *Voice is the Original Instrument* (Lovely Music, 2003). Runhild Gammelsæter, *Amplicon* (Utech, 2008).

Notes

1. Naomi Wolf 'Young women, give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female voice' *The Guardian* 24 July 2015. www.theguardian. com/commentisfree/2015/jul/24/vocal-fry-strong-female-voice2. Ibid

3. Mike Vuolo 'Lexicon valley #24: get your creak on' *Slate* 2 January 2013.www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2013/01/ lexicon_valley_on_creaky_voice_or_vocal_fry_in_young_american_ women.html

4. ''In a World...' is a comedy about, you guessed it, voice-over artists' NPR 25 July 2015 www.npr.org/2013/07/25/204510672/in-a-world-is- a-comedy-about-you-guessed-it-voice-over-artists5.'Faith Salie on speaking with "vocal fry" CBS News 12 September 2013. www.cbsnews.com/videos/faith-salie-on-speaking-with-vocal- fry/

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12. Mike Vuolo 'Lexicon valley #24: get your creak on'

13. Anne Carson 'The Gender of Sound' in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions Books, 1992) pp.119-142 p.121

14. Ibid

15. Rosalind Gill,'Justifying injustice: broadcasters' accounts of inequality in radio' in Caroline Mitchell (ed.) *Women and Radio: Airing Differences* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp.137-151

16. Anne Carson 'The gender of sound' p.119

17. See Marie Thompson 'Gossips, Siren, Hi-fi Wives: Feminizing the Threat of Noise' in Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Rebecca Spelman (eds.) *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 297-311

18. Giselle Bastin 'Pandora's Voice Box: How Woman Became the 'Gossip Girl'' in Melissa Ames and Sarah Himsel (eds.) *Women and Language: Essays on Gendered Communication Across Media* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company inc. Publishers, 2011) pp.17-29

19. Michael Edward Edgerton *The 21st Century Voice: Contemporary and Traditional Extra-Normal Voice* (New York: Rowan and Littlehead, 2015) p.22

20. Susan McClary 'Afterword: The Politics of Silence and Sound' in Jacques Attali *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* pp.149-158 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985) p.157

21.Julian Cowley 'Experimental voice phenomenon' *The Wire* Issue 301 (2009) pp. 26-31 quote p.26

22. See, for example, *Daily Mail* report 'Vocal fry: the new craze in talking inspired by Britney Spears, Ke$ha and Kim Kardashian' *Daily Mail*, 13 December 2011. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2073800/ Vocal-fry-The-new-craze-talking-inspired-Britney-Spears-Ke-ha.html

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24. 'Thorr's Hammer' Blood Sisters: Women in Metal Hardcore, Grind and Noise' (2005), available at: http://kzsu.stanford.edu/~hannah/t/ thorrshammer.html

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